# Fluency and Dysfluency in Same-Sex Interactions: Preliminary Results

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# FLUENCY AND DYSFLUENCY IN SAME-SEX INTERACTIONS: PRELIMINARY RESULTS

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With many Japanese speakers who are meeting for the first time, hesitation phenomena and dysfluency can often be noted as speakers try to establish understanding, status, roles, and intent. This preliminary study, which is based on 10 discussions (5 female-female, 5 male-male), investigated which gender produced more fluency / dysfluency in same-sex discussions. Japanese university students were asked to talk with another student, who they had not previously met before, for periods longer than 10 minutes. Correct/incorrect pausing was also examined. Results indicated that for the fluency variable of speaking time, there was no significance found between the two genders, though females averaged 76.8 seconds in cross-talk pausing whereas males averaged 5.2 seconds. There were also no significant differences for articulation rates, and speaking rates. Males had more silence in their speech than females, though mean length of pauses were slightly shorter for men, 3.9 seconds compared to women, 7.3. As for dysfluency, no significant differences were found for acoustic dysfluency or syntactical dysfluency though males averaged 677 syllables in their speech compared to 521 for women. Likewise, men did talk longer than women (15.9% more), averaging 434 words compared to 370 for women. Japanese women tend to talk at a faster speaking rate, (7.5% faster) but with fewer meaningless syllables. Females paused correctly twice as often than males, whereas males incorrectly paused twice as much as females. Thus, differences do exist in same-sex interactions between the two genders in regard to the amount of silence in cross-talk exchanges, meaningless syllables, correct/incorrect pausing, and with the amount of speech that was produced.

**Keywords:** Same-sex discourse, Fluency, Dysfluency, Japanese learners, Awareness.

## Introduction

Throughout the world, interacting and conversing with the opposite sex often proves more difficult than with one's own gender. For many men and women, it is simply easier to relate to someone of the same sex, especially in expressing ideas and values, contexts, problems, and hopes. Experience and conventional wisdom would argue that conversational ease and satisfaction would be higher than with same-sex discourse, as there is far less pressure to meet the socio-pragmatic conventions, to respond to requests and views appropriately, all the while projecting an ideal image that is satisfying to the opposite sex. Of all the variables involved in communication, West & Zimmerman (1987) have observed that gender is a powerful ideological device, one that can influence the views, decisions, and outcomes of interactions. Furthermore, researchers have pointed out that gender depictions are less a consequence of *essential sexual natures* than interactional portrayals and conventions. As such, gender helps to determine

how conversations will be framed, and it can influence the division of labor in talk; Fishman (1978) found in his research on casual conversations that women had to ask more questions, fill in more silences, and more attention getting beginnings in order to be heard. Tannen (1990) notes that women are also with achieving status and avoiding failure whereas men are concerned with achieving involvement and avoiding isolation. Other research findings found that men (in all-male discussion groups) spent a great of time finding out who was the most informed about movies, books, politics, and current events as well travel so as to "size up the competition" and better understand where they stood in relation to each other 130).

While such topical and socio-pragmatic characteristics might be generally representative of some male-to-male (MM) and female-to-female (FF) speech in some contexts, it is important to look at empirical data concerning the fluency and dysfluency of same-sex speech, for these two issues will have far more influence on determining positive and negative outcomes. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to compare the fluency of (MM) and (FF) speech examining fluency indicators such as articulation rates, speaking rates, mean length runs, number of words, the amount of silence, in addition, to correct and incorrect pausing.

## Review of Literature

### *Gender influences*

Of all of the variables that can impact discourse, gender is perhaps the most influential with past research showing differences in the speech that takes place between males and between females. Wood (1966) found that males talked more than females when describing photographs of male faces and similar results were obtained later from discourse concerning paintings. However, women were more talkative on three of nine topics (Gall, Hobby, and Craik,1969), yet in gendered discourse, men talk more than women (Argle, Lalljee, & Cook, 1968; Sayers, 1984, Long, 2016). One of the most controversial statements made about women's discourse was that women had their own language; women's language (WL) had its own distinctive set of features: *female register, powerless language,* and *deferential language.* It should be noted that Crawford and Roger (1986) found that the occurrence of WL was unaffected by topic or gender as it was more determined by context.

Such ideas led to the *deficit* and *dominance theories* which state that any linguistic inadequacies in women's speech are the result of women's political and cultural inequalities and that conversational dominance is based on wider political and social issues (Freeman & McElhinny, 1996). Lakoff (1975), in particular, argues that there were characteristic features in the discourse of women or *women's language* (WL), that it is marked by powerlessness and tentativeness, expressed through the use of mitigators and inessential qualifiers. Freeman & McElhinny, (1996, p. 232), provide a comprehensive list of Lakoff's (1975) claims of WL below:

- Use of expletives while women use weaker ones
- Women's speech is more polite than men's
- Trivial, unimportant topics are considered to be women's domain
- Women use empty adjectives
- Women use tag questions more often than men
- Women express uncertainty through the use of the question intonation pattern
- Women use more intensifiers
- Hedges are used more often by woman
- Hyper-correct grammar is a feature of women's speech
- Women don't tell jokes

Lakoff also assets that it women will not be assertive or show authority, and if women were to do so, they would be criticized as not be lady-like. Lakoff's claims have been reviewed and studied empirically,

and many of the claims have been rebutted. Other researchers like Zimmermann & West (1975) have extended on the list by including interruptions and silence, with males tending to interrupt more than women. West & Zimmermann (1983) also argued that interruptions are "a device for exercising power and control in conversation" (p. 103). One of the many issues to the dominance theory is that it treats all men as being in positions of power, and all women as being victims of a patriarchal society, acting in ways that are weak, passive, and often irrational. Common sense shows that men are often in powerless positions, and can act passive and irrational. So, the theory might be valid in only some circumstances, but the question remains as to how WL language might change in settings in which women feel more comfortable and secure, in cultures that are more matriarchal, and in various socio-economic settings in which people are either very rich or poor.

Tentativeness is also associated with WL, particularly in how women relied upon hedges, using linguistic forms such as *for instance, I think, you know*, *I'm sure, sort of, perhaps*; Lakoff (1975) contends that women's speech contains more hedges than speech of males insofar that women have been taught to believe that strong assertions are not feminine. Coates (1993), however, argues that women prefer to talk about personal topics so hedges are needed to reflect tact whereas men focus on impersonal subjects, which can stand critical and even controversial assertions. Hedges can also be seen in the use of tag questions like, *didn't I? right? wasn't he? etc.* Lakoff claims that females use more tag questions than males, though Long (2016) found that Japanese males used twice as many tag questions in L2 speech than women did in gendered discourse.

Some researchers took issue with Lakoff's (1975) deficit and dominance theories, proposing *difference theory,* which emphasizes that the reason for any difference in language use comes from early socialization, psychological differences, and socialization differences in social power; however, biological differences are said to lead to different rates of language acquisition causing possible differences in learning. Under this theory, one difference in language use is that women tend to focus on connections, and developing involvement while men value autonomy and independence. A key factor in difference theory is that of social power with men exercising a greater degree of power, thereby often dominating many interactions. This greater degree of power brings about more competitiveness whereas women are postulated as having a more cooperative conversational style (Coates & Cameron, 1988). To distinguish between these two conversational styles, Coates (1986) states that women rely on gradual topic development, frequent and well-placed minimal responses, and overlapping speech and linguistic forms, which tone down what the speaker is saying. West & Zimmerman (1987) and Deuchar (1988) both have emphasized that those who see themselves as powerless tend to be more polite. In short, Coates argues that women tend to focus on maintaining social relationships with the goal of consolidating friendships, which is then reflected in how they interact. Wardhaugh (2010) did present five testable claims based on Holmes (1998);

1. Women and men develop different patterns of language use.
2. Women tend to focus on the affective functions of an interaction more often than men do.
3. Women tend to use linguistic devices that stress solidarity more than men do.
4. Women tend to interact in ways, which will maintain and increase solidarity, while (especially in the formal context) men tend to interact in ways which will maintain and increase their power and status.
5. Women are stylistically more flexible than men.

Finally, Sunderland (2004) notes that to best research gender, one should come "from an understanding of post-structuralism and discursive psychology, it is important to see gender as a *process*, something that people *orient to* and *do*—including in their spoken and written discourse" (p. 17). Research shows that men simply talk more than women (e.g. Swacker, 1975; Eakins & Eakins, 1976, Long, 2016), which could be a factor in communicative competency, so one issue to examine in FF and MM interactions is that of *production*. In mixed-sex conversations it has been found that men's topics are more often pursued, while women play a *supportive* role (Fishman, 1978). A key and crucial issue is how

fluency and dysfluency might change with more interactions and a greater degree of familiarity in all-male and all-female discussions.

## The Study

### *Rationale*

Examining discourse through a social constructionist perspective allows language to be viewed as a set of strategies for negotiating the social landscape – an action-oriented medium in its own right (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). A social constructionist view of language also emphasizes that talk is a powerful resource, which can help sustain individuals through difficulties, help them to enlist their help, and protect themselves. At higher levels of language proficiency, more elaborate strategies are needed as well as the *fluency* that can be used to truly influence people and to justify relationships. Thus, this study, by examining both potential high and low rates for various fluency variables and also communicative competency issues (strategies) relating to the smooth exchange of ideas, might produce important clues as how women and men interact with one another.

West and Zimmerman (1987) note that "gender furnishes the interactional scaffolding of social structure, along with a built-in mechanism of social control . . . Gender is a powerful ideological device, which produces, reproduces, and legitimates the choices and limits that are predicated on sex category" (p. 147). This helps us to better understand social control but this leads to the question if there are distinct characteristics in how each gender controls their discourse, makes decisions, and whether or not this social control impacts fluency and dysfluency. While research (Long, 2016) points to previous differences in gendered speech, the question remains as to what differences exist (if at all) in fluency and dysfluency of L2 between Japanese of the same gender. Does fluency and dysfluency differ in interactions between males to males from females to females?

### *Independent Variables*

The first independent variable is based on test scores; for this study, proficiency was split into two groups. Standard test scores were divided to establish a *lower* proficiency group of participants and another representing *higher* proficiency, see table 1. The subjects for this study were taken from the lower proficiency group.

**Table 1.** Scores for lower and higher proficiency students

| TOEIC | Eiken 英検 | IELTS | TOEFL IBT | TOEFL ITP | TOEFL PBT | TOEFL CBT |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 440 – 550 | 2 腥 | 3.0 – 4.0 | 42 – 55 | 272 – 450 | 463 – 480 | 143 - 157 |

| TOEIC | Eiken 英検 | IELTS | TOEFL IBT | TOEFL ITP | TOEFL PBT | TOEFL CBT |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 715 – 980 | 犯↟ 腥！↔↟ 腥 | 6.0 – 9.0 | 80 – 120 | 509 – 644 | 500 – 677 | 213 - 300 |

The second independent variable was that of gender. Many researchers such as Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1995) have pointed out that gender constructs are embedded in so many aspects of social life (race, race or ethnicity); Butler (1993), Bergyall (1996), and Freed (1996, 1999) likewise point out that gender is a *performative* social construct in which it is important to know *how* gender is performed or conveyed in a discourse. In short, language is a tool for developing and maintaining one's identity.

### *Definition of Terms*

***Dysfluency Variables.*** The first variable for acoustic dysfluency, micropauses, are defined as any pause lasting less than 2.0 seconds in order to differentiate between actual pausing or other rhythmic or lexical hesitations. Acoustic dysfluency also took into account the amount of cross-talk pausing, the amount of silence, percentage of silence, and mean length of pauses. Lexical dysfluency included the variables of mispronounced words, word fragments, and the use of L1. As this study considered only the use of English (L2), any Japanese was not considered as part of the data unless it was used to refer to places, people, or were words that had been absorbed into the language like *karate, kendo, bento*. Syntactic dysfluency refers to abandoned sentences, retracing, repetition, average mean length runs, number of words, and meaningless syllables (which did not include word fragments). Repetition included only actual words and not filled pauses whereas retracings represented reformulations and partial repetitions of previous phrases or clauses.

***Fluency variables.*** Fluency was analyzed by examining the speaker's *articulation rate* (AR), which is computed by dividing the number of syllables by the cumulative time talking after deducting the amount for pausing. The second variable of *speech rate* (SR) is defined as the number of meaningful syllables within a narrative; this number is then divided by the number of seconds used to complete the task and multiplied by 60. The result is referred as fluency rate A by Wendel (1997) whereas fluency rate B is the speech rate in which all meaningless syllables, words, phrases that were repeated, reformulated, or replaced are excluded. By dividing fluency rate A from B, a fluency differential could then be obtained so as to better understand the extent of a participant's dysfluency. A third variable of *mean length runs* (MLR) takes into account the number of syllables that are uttered until the speaker stops talking or pauses whereas *pauses* are defined, in this study, as any silence lasting two seconds. In this way, natural hesitation phenomena such as breathing space, semantic hesitation at clause junctures, or from lexical or morphological uncertainty were was not categorized as pausing.

### *Research Questions*

This paper examines the complexity and patterns in production in the same-sex discourse between 10 males and 10 females who tested at the lower level of proficiency, as designated by standardized test scores such as TOEFL, EIKEN, IELTS, TOEIC scores.

The research questions are as follows:

1. Is there a significant difference in fluency indicators of time talking, articulation rates, speaking rate, and between the MM and FF speech?
2. Concerning MM and FF speech, is there a significant difference in acoustic dysfluency (micropauses, amount of silence, mean length runs), lexical dysfluency (mispronounced words, word fragments, use of L1), and syntactic dysfluency indicators (abandoned sentences, retracing, repetition, average mean length runs, total syllables, number of words, meaningless syllables) and in pausing?

### *Hypotheses*

The hypotheses are as follows:

1. There will be no significant differences in fluency indicators noted in either MM and FF speech.
2. There will be no significant differences in acoustic, lexical and syntactical dysfluency as well as correct/incorrect pausing between the MM and FF speech.

### *Procedures*

Students were asked to show proof of having taken a standardized English test. This study examined only the fluency and dysfluency of lower-proficiency students. Four participants, two females and two males, were then selected and asked to sign release statements regarding privacy issues relating to videotaping; one final check was made to see if the participants were unfamiliar with each other. The primary aim of the study was to investigate same-sex discourse between two strangers, so as to better understand issues relating to ease, politeness, silence, status, and pragmatics as well as issues relating to fluency and dysfluency. As discourse can help in clarifying issues related to *dominance* and *subordination*, a better understanding how social distance is bridged can be obtained. As Coates (1996) observes, discourse between intimates is most likely to be more fluent. She also notes that there is often less dysfluency insofar that both participants are known, and there are fewer issues that are deemed threatening, and status has been well-established. Discussions began with two gendered discussions simultaneously took place in different rooms. Afterwards, a second gendered interaction took place with the males changing rooms. The third interaction took place afterwards, with the two females and between the two males. These discussions ranged from 6 minutes to 15 minutes. These videotaped discussions were then uploaded to Youtube, see notes; analysis of the videotapes helped to better understand nonvocal behaviors (e.g., gaze aversion and realignment of body orientation) that took place as well as subtle patterns of conversational behavior that occurred. Only the videos and transcripts of the same-sex interactions were used for this study.

### *Discussion format*

So as to exclusively examine fluency and dysfluency, instead of communicative competency issues, a discussion format was introduced before the interaction. The format was based on students first gathering information on a certain topic and talking for around four minutes, and then moving on to shared interests, and then a third item based on cognitive loading, would have subjects answer a personal or social issue. If students finished the three topics before the time allotted, they could move on to the next three on the list.

### *Subjects*

The 20 participants for this study were drawn from two major universities in Kitakyushu, one being a municipal university and the other a national university. All students had lived in Japan and had limited study abroad experiences.

### *Data Analysis*

Data related to fluency and dysfluency was analyzed with Microsoft Excel and the statistical software WINKS-SDA 7 in order to conduct t-tests. Descriptive data were also compared.

## Results

In regard to the first hypothesis, that there will be no significant differences in fluency variables between MM and FF interactions, for speaking time, results were $t(4) = 1.4483$, $p < 0.2211$; articulation rate $t(4) = 0.29887$, $p < 0.7799$, speaking rate A $t(4) = 0.37072$, $p < 0.7296$, and for the variable of speaking rate B $t(4) = 0.5425$, $p < 0.6163$. Concerning acoustic dysfluency, likewise no significance was noted for micropauses, $t(4) = 0.4264$, $p < 0.6918$, amount of silence, $t(4) = .038469$, $p < 0.72$, mean length of pauses, $t(4) = 1.41552$, $p < 0.229$. For lexical dysfluency, no significance was also noted for mispronounced words $t(4) = 0.30151$, $p < 0.778$, word fragments, $t(4) = .0$, $p < 1.0$, or for the use of L1 $t(4) = 1.9069$, $p < 0.1292$. As for syntactical dysfluency, no significance was also noted for abandoned sentences, $t(4) = 0.2325$, $p < 0.8276$, retracing $t(4) = 0.40825$, $p < 0.704$, repetition $t(4) = 2.00748$, $p < 0.1151$, average mean length runs $t(4) = 0.78386$, $p < 0.4769$, total syllables $t(4) = 0.73519$, $p < 0.503$, number of words $t(4) = 0.51234$, $p < 0.6354$, and meaningless syllables $t(4) = 1.68245$, $p < 0.1678$.

Results indicated that for the fluency variable of speaking time, there was no significance found between the two genders, though females averaged 76.8 seconds in cross-talk pausing whereas males averaged 5.2 seconds. There were also no significant differences for articulation rates, and speaking rates. Males had more silence in their speech than females, and mean length of pauses differed slightly, with women pausing 7.3 seconds and men 3.9. Men did talk longer than women (15.9% more),, averaging 434 words compared to 370 for women. Similarly, men had longer average mean length runs, 13.2 syllables, compared to 10.8 for women. Females paused correctly twice as often than males, whereas males incorrectly paused twice as much as females. Thus, some differences do exist in same-sex interactions between the two genders in regard to the amount of silence in cross-talk exchanges, meaningless syllables, correct/incorrect pausing, and with the amount of speech that was produced.

**Table 2.** Descriptive data for gender dysfluency

| | FF Interactions | MM Interactions |
|---|---|---|
| Speaking Time | 236.1 | 33.2 |
| Articulation rate | 2.1 | 1.9 |
| Speaking Rate A | 128.9 | 119.3 |
| Speaking Rate B | 123.4 | 109.1 |
| | | |
| **Acoustic Dysfluency** | | |
| Micropauses | 4.2 | 5.2 |
| Amount of silence | 19.2 | 24.1 |
| Mean Length of pauses | 7.3 | 3.9 |
| Cross-talk pausing | 76.8 | 5.2 |
| Mispronounced Words | 0.6 | 0.4 |
| Word fragments | 1 | 1 |
| Use of L1 | 1.6 | 1.6 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Syntactic Dysfluency** | | |
| Abandoned sentences | 1.6 | 1.4 |
| Retracing | 2.2 | 2.0 |
| Repetition | 6.8 | 28.8 |
| Average Mean Length Runs | 11.96 | 13.2 |
| Total Syllables | 521.8 | 677.0 |
| Number of words | 370 | 434.6 |
| Meaningless Syllables | 22.8 | 61.6 |

Note: Data is shown in averages.

Japanese women tend to talk at a faster speaking rate, (7.5% faster) but with fewer meaningless syllables. While it remains to be seen how this particular figure might change in varying contexts, ages, and nationalities. In examining increasing number of words with data relating to amount of silence and fluency rate B, preliminary data indicates that as both genders become more productive, the amount of silence decreases while the fluency rate shows a gradual increase, see figure 1. Thus, in both MM and FF interactions, the level of production indicates a slightly higher level of fluency.

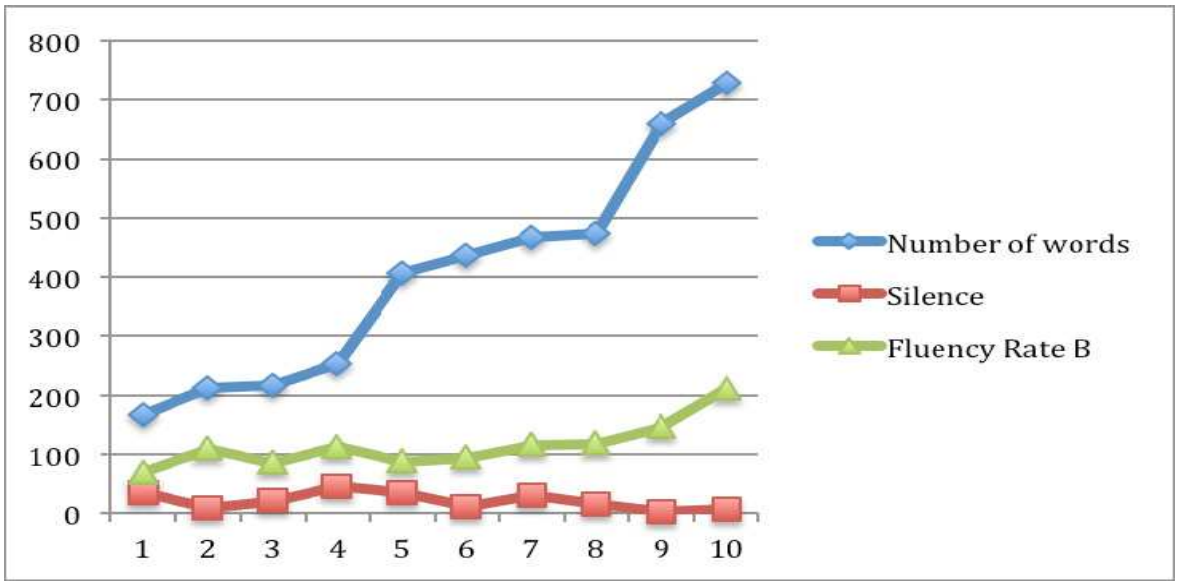


**Figure 1.** Production, amount of silence and fluency rate B.

In examining many transcripts, it is not uncommon to find that some conversations are unbalanced with one speaker being more fluent or productive than the other. This issue can relate various factors such as dominance, the speaker's motivation, passivity as it is uncommon that people to enter into a conversation with same amount of information, motivation, and goals as the other. This unbalance can lead too less coherence in the overall framing of ideas, and, in turn, can influence the final outcome of the interaction. Thus, the variable of question formation (particularly regarding the *frequency* and the *kinds* of questions being asked) provides some insight into the speaker's motivation, insofar that with fewer and similar types of questions, a lower-level of motivation might be a factor. Whereas with various kinds of questions and at a higher frequency, interest and motivation might be appear to be greater. Furthermore,

by comparing this kind of data in MM and FF interactions, it is possible to better understand how males and females go about eliciting information. In table three, women asked twice as many *do* and *confirmatory* questions than males, and in total, females asked 24% more questions than male speakers. The frequent use of confirmatory questions with women indicates more attention to what is being said, and validating it, thereby establishing a more supportive exchange.

**Table 3.** Questions types in MM and FF interactions.

| Question type | Interactions | FF Interactions |
|---|---|---|
| Who | 1 | 0 |
| What | 22 | 22 |
| Which | 1 | 0 |
| Why | 3 | 4 |
| When | 1 | 0 |
| Where | 1 | 3 |
| How | 8 | 12 |
| Do | 17 | 30 |
| Is | 2 | 1 |
| Are | 0 | 2 |
| Can | 2 | 3 |
| Have | 4 | 3 |
| Confirm | 10 | 22 |
| Tag questions | 5 | 0 |
| Other | 18 | 19 |
| Total | 95 | 121 |

Finally, concerning the second research question regarding pause location, we can see that females paused correctly more than males, and that males had double the rate of incorrect pausing, see table 4.

**Table 4.** Descriptive data for MM and FF pausing.

| Transcripts Males | Correct | Incorrect | Transcripts Females | Correct | Incorrect |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5 MM | 0 | 5 | 3 FF | 1 | 5 |
| 12 MM | 0 | 1 | 16 FF | 9 | 4 |
| 15 MM | 2 | 6 | 17 FF | 6 | 1 |
| 20 MM | 5 | 12 | 19 FF | 5 | 1 |
| 30 MM | 1 | 19 | 29 FF | 8 | 5 |
| Total | 8 | 43 | Total | 29 | 16 |

## Discussion

The data concerning the first and second hypothesis regarding possible differences in fluency and dysfluency between MM and FF interactions showed no significant differences though the speech of MM and FF interactions. The data indicates that males are 15.9% more productive when taking into account number of words; however, again, it remains to be seen how this particular figure might change in varying contexts, ages, and nationalities. As for question formation, women tend to ask more questions than males indicating a possible higher level of interest, but the question remains as to how this might change with more familiarity and interactions. It is important to ask how might age and status of the participants might impact the use of questions.

In society, people are evaluated and given access to rewards, and then directed towards (or away) from other potential sources and individuals based on how they can communicate their ideas effectively. Women are often systematically disadvantaged in such interactions, and even in FF discourse, it is important for women (and men) to understand the notions, functions, and speech acts in which women should be using and can positively impact outcomes. Of course, in every context and with various socio-economic groups, there are *performance expectations,* which the speakers bring and form during the discourse; these are ideas about how useful their own contributions to the group goal are as compared to others (England, 1993). These, in turn, form conscious judgments. The speaker's fluency and dysfluency will also impact such judgments, as well as turn-taking, and the presence of minimal responses. In short, the effectiveness of the speaker's language use can greatly impact the scope and depth of change that he or she can bring about in society. Thus, more research is needed on the paralinguistic features of FF and MM interactions in a variety of settings and then to examine specific patterns in which women and men effectively enlist help, justify their actions, arguments, relationships, obtain resources and establish relationships, as well as how aggression and discord enters into MM and FF speech.

## Conclusion

Face-to-face interactions are being avoided due to various socio-pragmatic risks, and as many Japanese are relying more on technology, (posting comments, using Internet chat, and email), the art of conversing may be lost in the scramble for production, less anxiety, and more privacy. This data does indicate important issues and *problems* in how men and women communicate in face-to-face settings. However, this information is important as a guide as to how our own students (and indeed ourselves) might be interacting in various kinds of settings, particularly, with people who have been just introduced. In short, this preliminary data does clearly show that there are important differences in how women communicate with other women and how men interact with other men. However, far more research is needed on how MM and FF communication changes in different contexts, between friends, various nationalities, and with older participants for us to better understand the socio-pragmatic issues and overall characteristics of same-sex interactions.

## Notes

1. Gender Discourse Playlist:
   https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLPRLY1xK6EnyL7w6auVV4nvQODZ4T_GiT
2. Gender videos, transcripts and analysis are available at: genderfluency.com

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**Biodata**

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